

THE REAL MEANING OF CINCO DE MAYO

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For all the vast quantities of time, money, and energy that many Americans spend on creating an extravagant Mexican-inspired fiesta to celebrate the Cinco de Mayo (5th of May), one would assume that these hordes of fiesta-goers might have, at the very least, a hint of the reason why this Mexican-inspired occasion is celebrated in the United States. More often than not, those caught up in this fiesta frenzy don't have even the slightest clue. Complete with caricatures of oversized sleepy Mexicans drinking tequila, the thumping rhythm of rumba music and dancing Chihuahua dogs wearing sombreros, the Cinco de Mayo fiesta in the United States has lost any real connection to its true origin, history and heritage. It is now an institutionalized, hyper-commercialized and Americanized concoction of Mexican stereotypes and American inspired sophomoric party marketing. The time has come for a serious dialog about the Cinco de Mayo that will reveal its deeper historical significance for both Mexico and the United States, as well as the development of its own unique American branding.

While almost all things Mexican are ascribed to this unique Americano celebration, when pressed as to why Americans celebrate the Cinco de Mayo most mislabel it generically as an important Mexican holiday. Some believe incorrectly that this date is Mexican Independence Day or even the date commemorating the Mexican Revolution. Some of the more imaginative reasons that have been given for celebrating the Cinco de Mayo in the United States stray so far from truth that it is fair to say no Mexican could easily recognize, nor fully relate to, its north-of-the-border adaptation. At the very least, Mexicans find the Americanized Cinco de Mayo Mexican fandango an amazing curiosity. They look with bewilderment and sometimes amusement at the hyper-fascination that Americans have with this date, especially in light of the historic discord between the United States and Mexico over the immigration issue.

In Mexico, this date is not even recognized as an official national holiday. Some Mexicans, primarily in the state of Puebla, will only modestly acknowledge the historical events that mark this date. The related Mexican celebrations certainly will not be the raucous pseudo-fiestas that are characteristic of many of the Cinco de Mayo celebrations carried on from coast to coast in the United States. The almost incongruous nature of this celebration in the United States begs the question of just what the Cinco de Mayo really is, when and how it began, and why this commemoration spread across the border. The Cinco de Mayo celebration in the United States is an interesting, but serious, phenomenon that deserves deeper understanding and further explanation.

The Cinco de Mayo is recognized in Mexico as the date (May 5) that Mexican troops were victorious against the invading French army at the battle of Puebla in 1862. The French had invaded Mexico, ostensibly to coerce payment for a large foreign debt. The real motivation, however, was Napoleon III's thrust for the restoration of the French monarchy and to build the greatest empire in the world. Under the command of General Laurnecez, 5,200 well-trained and handsomely uniformed French dragoons and foot soldiers landed on Mexican soil and were given orders to occupy Mexico City. Directly in the path of their march to the capitol was the city of Puebla, courageously defended by 4,700 Mexicans armed with antiquated guns and modest equipment. The Commander of Puebla's forces was Ignacio Zaragoza, a seasoned guerilla warfare strategist born in what is now the state of Texas. In a show of contempt and power, Laurencez led a charge up the middle of the Mexican defenses at Zaragoza's most strongly fortified position. The charge carried the French cavalry through some of the worst of Mexico's cactus-covered hills and resulted in the loss of almost 1,000 French soldiers, and ultimately led to the defeat of the French

in this battle. It was a military blunder and humiliation of mammoth proportions for the power-hungry French that caused the world powers to perceive Napoleon and his French foreign Legion in a new and unflattering perspective.

The Mexican battle of the Cinco de Mayo should have tremendous historic and cultural significance for people on both sides of the U.S. Mexico border. It was a battle won but a war lost. Although this battle did not signify the end of the war with France, it did mark an important milestone in the history of North America, the United States, and the world. This was the first time that the world's most feared army, Napoleon's French Foreign Legion, had met defeat in almost half a century, and it was a resounding romping handed down—not by a major European power—but by the brave men and women of the humble war-torn Republic of Mexico.

This victory inspired a groundswell of Mexican national pride and became an important symbol of national patriotism. Moreover, it gave the French and the rest of the world a renewed perspective of the Mexican national character, one that had been completely misunderstood and underestimated by the powers of Europe. Mexicans, once belittled for being an incapable mixed lot of Mestizos and Indians, could now hold their heads up high. The Nation of Mexico was, in a sense, reborn with a renewed purpose and spirit. The world took note, and on this the date an under-equipped Mexican army ushered Mexico into the ring of world power in the 19th century. It was more than a battle won; it served to take away the collective sting of humiliation that Mexico felt fourteen years earlier in 1848 when the United States permanently and unethically seized one half of Mexico in the Mexican-American War.

The historic significance of this battle for the United States is only now beginning to be fully uncovered. Some historians believe that Mexico's defeat of the French at this battle may have played an important role in keeping the French from arming the South in the Civil War, thus tipping the balance towards the Union army and President Lincoln. Although full evidence has yet to be confirmed, speculations were that Napoleon had even grander plans of invading the Civil War-torn United States once his empire had been successfully spread to Mexico. Could Napoleon have invaded the scarred United States if France had been successful in defeating Mexico? We can only muse about that historic scenario. We do definitively know, however, that Mexicans fought bravely during the French occupation, and the battle of the 5th of May in 1862 against the French marks the last time a foreign army has ever invaded the continent of North America. It is a date that deserves to be honored, understood, recognized and remembered by both Mexicans and Americans.

How this Mexican battle date was imported to the United States to become a celebration, is a story as misunderstood and convoluted as Mexico's relationship with the United States. The story begins just after the Mexican American war that ended in 1846. The United States invaded Mexico on this date and took possession of one-half of Mexico two years later. The Mexicans who chose to remain on what was once Mexican land suddenly and quite unceremoniously became U.S. citizens. They were now Mexican Americans living under American law. They did however, continue their kinship with Mexican language, history, customs, and culture, including holidays and other significant celebrations. Conscripted or by choice, many Mexican Americans lived in culturally homogeneous barrios throughout the American Southwest. Through time, these Mexican American communities became marginalized economically and socially by the dominant Anglo population, yet many continued to hold tenaciously to a sense of their Mexican identity and pride, and actively sought opportunities to collectively celebrate their heritage. Professor Hayes-Bautista, has recently show that after Cinco de Mayo battle of 1862, "In town after town, camp after camp, mine after mine, ranch after ranch, Latinos eagerly absorbed the news. Those who could read shared the glorious details with their illiterate fellows, and up and down the state, Latinos savored

the blow-by-blow reporting from the front lines of the conflict that had so riveted their attention." He further states that the Cinco de Mayo victory was then memorialized through a network of Latino groups called "juntas patrióticas mejicanas," or Mexican patriotic assemblies, mostly in California but also in Oregon, Nevada and Arizona, with 14,000 members, Hayes-Bautista said. The first recorded celebration of the Cinco de Mayo may have occurred in California. In 1863, a Mexican American entrepreneur initiated a Cinco de Mayo fandango in the hope that his Mexican and Spanish dance performances could be marketed for profit as a cultural tradition. In the early 1930s, to ameliorate even harsher conditions and circumstances brought on by the Great Depression and as a way for Mexican American residents to protect, promote and maintain a sense of community, residents in the Southwest United States created local Mexican American social clubs and church groups. It is here that the kernel of what we know as the celebration of the Cinco de Mayo was first collectively recognized and incubated in the 19th century in the United States. Inspired by this 1862 victory, some Mexican Americans' community organizations chose to celebrate the Cinco de Mayo holiday in a way that is unique to their Mexican American community.

After World War II, many Mexican American soldiers who had participated in the war felt a stronger sense of patriotism towards the United States and began to assert the new values and attitudes they brought home with them. Some of these soldiers organized their collective voice in recognition of their roles as U.S. soldiers in a direct attempt to ameliorate the sharp sting of the prejudice and discrimination they continued to face in health care, employment, housing, voting, education and the other basic rights guaranteed to them and their families under the United States Constitution. To this end, community organizations such as the G.I Forum and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) initiated efforts to express their patriotism and to foster Mexican American community self-determination and self-worth. During this period, the seeds of a broader community-based activism and more direct participation in the American political system also afforded a new way of integrating Mexican cultural pride into their communities. The organizations were to play an even stronger role in these efforts, especially as they related to the Cinco de Mayo, almost forty years after the soldiers returned home from WWII.

However, it was not until the late 1960s that Chicano civil rights activists on college campuses purposely identified and adopted the Battle of Puebla and May 5 as their day to celebrate this Mexican victory in the United States. It was celebrated predominately in the Southwest United State and California, and it was here where the activist community lifted this date out of the Chicano barrios and onto Main Street. College campuses for the first time heard the cries of, "Viva la raza – viva Cinco de Mayo!" That cry was a bold statement of historical and cultural self-determination, cultural allegiance with Mexico and in defiant recognition of the accomplishments of the capable Mestizo people of Aztlan, Mexico's land lost in 1848. It was an affirmation of the cultural and social solidarity of the Mexican American community with Mexico's past.

This date became a vehicle for reaching back into a proud Mexican history to build a new Chicano / Latino/a future. It was strategically imported as an important symbol of social and cultural pride alongside images depicting the struggle of farmworkers by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta; the Mexican Revolutionary heroes Poncho Villa, Adelita and Emiliano Zapata; student walk-outs in California; the hope in the eye of the struggle brought by the Virgin of Guadalupe; and the fight for lost ancestral lands in New Mexico by Reyes Lopez Tijerina.

Just as the Mexican Mestizo soldiers at the battle of Puebla proudly triumphed in the face of overwhelming odds and adversity, Mexican American activists in the United States related to this struggle and deliberately chose to adopt this important Mexican victory as their victory. It was strong affirmation of a commitment to self-identification and a way Chicanos could express the shared pride for their unique

Mexican American history and heritage. The Chicano activist movement in the 1960s and 70s used this date to inspire a community whose contribution and history had been marginalized, under-recognized, and deliberately overlooked. Together they found a new strength, and as an underdog community adopted this day to celebrate a truly uniting sense of shared identity. They symbolically joined hands with the Mestizo people across the Mexican border and all of Latin America. A new and hopeful Chicano holiday emerged triumphantly from the civil rights struggle.

It wasn't until the 1980s when the Cinco de Mayo made its leap from idealized Chicano activist celebration to what we see celebrated in the United States today. It was during this period that the commercialization of Cinco de Mayo, as we know it today, was thrust upon the American consumer. It was the Coors Brewing Company, with the desire to improve its image among Chicano activists, which became the largest supporter of the Cinco de Mayo as a holiday event. Chicano activists had successfully boycotted the brewing company for discriminatory practices against Hispanics and forced a settlement that would lead to the company's Hispanic cultural epiphany and its role as a full-fledged promoter of the Cinco de Mayo as a Mexican American holiday.

Rodolfo F. Acuña notes in his book Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles that in 1985 the National Council of La Raza, the American GI Forum, and later the League of United Latin Americans Citizens signed an historic agreement with the brewing company to stop the long-standing boycott in exchange for more than \$350 million in donations to Latino organizations. Almost overnight, because of this infusion of cash, the celebration of Cinco de Mayo spread from the American Southwest to begin a new and ubiquitous presence in bars and restaurants across the United States, quicker than Warner Brothers' cartoon character Speedy Gonzalez could run. The migration and transformation of the Cinco de Mayo celebration thus began its expedited journey, fueled by a fully funded, well-planned and deliberate marketing assault. There was no turning back. Almost everything that Chicano civil rights activists in the 1960s instilled in this pride-filled commemoration was summarily stripped away overnight in the 1980s. Mass marketers, particularly beer, snack food, and holiday card companies, collectively seized this date as a convenient opportunity to create and commercialize a fabricated Mexican fiesta holiday. Presto! The pseudo Mexican Fiesta of Cinco de Mayo was reborn in the United States, as we know it now. For marketing executives, it was an ideal date that landed perfectly after Easter and before Labor Day. For the corporate marketers, it was a fiesta that was waiting to happen in light of the new growth in the Mexican and other Latino/a communities in the United States.

In the 1990s, a palpable Latino demographic shift was taking place in the United States. This increase in Mexican and Mexican Americans did not go unnoticed by the beer and snack food companies. Immigration patterns from Mexico to the United States vastly increased and birth rates for this population also grew. Marketers quickly realized that adopting and further commercializing this holiday could be a long-term marketing bonanza and an immense corporate economic boon. A unique Mexican American day of recognition was truly given a new life and a newly engineered Mexican makeover in the United States, complete with a Mexican beer, bushy mustache and colorful sombrero. For some cities in the United States, with or without Mexican communities, this celebration has now become more than a day of celebration. It is a week-long affair that is marked by Mexican food, tequila-infused margaritas, well-meaning cultural festivals, and local parades complete with shouts of "viva el Cinco de Mayo".

We all love a good fiesta; however, for many Mexican Americans, especially those who participated in the Chicano Movement of the 1960s as well as for Mexicans in Mexico, the celebration of the Battle of the Cinco de Mayo means so much more than a mere excuse for a fiesta. It provides the opportunity to recognize self-determination, the worthy goals of a hard fought victory against all odds, to share this pride

with all Americans, and to remind Americans of the friendship and sacrifices that Mexicans and Mexican Americans make every day to build and sustain this great country. It is also a time to reflect on the many events throughout history that Mexican and Mexican American people show that we have helped build the very foundation of America. Taken in this context, the Cinco de Mayo commemoration recognizes the Mexican and Mexican American spirit of courage, strength and independence engendered by that fateful day in Mexico at “La Batalla de Puebla” de Cinco de Mayo.

We have two choices. We can choose to passively (or even actively) lament the fact that clever United States marketing executives have summarily co-opted - if not deliberately hijacked through mass commercialization - a date of historic importance and cultural significance for Mexico and Mexican Americans in the United States. Alternatively, we can choose to join this ersatz Americano fiesta and try to make the proverbial margaritas out of lemons with this one. Latinos/as have the opportunity to harmonize in a melody that sings out the truth of our shared history. If we do this, the Cinco de Mayo can again be collectively used as an opportunity to educate, inform, and inspire for the public good as it was intended. It can be a punctuation indelibly set in time to honor those Mexicans and Mexican Americans who bravely defended our continent and to recognize our heroes around the world who unite to triumph over oppression, despite overwhelming challenges. Children and future generations can be inspired by learning how cooperation and dedication can lead to success against all odds. Universities can choose to reexamine Mexican and Mexican American history and identify how history is more than a sequencing of events, but is also a living thread of our collective cultural and social DNA. Taken in this sense, the Cinco de Mayo can be about the unique journey of the Mexican American people and all outsider communities.

So let's raise our glasses, and on this date join in making a toast to our shared Mexican and Mexican American history and to the recognition that since 1848 our freedom and liberty in North America was fought for and won collectively by Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Americans. This is the true meaning and spirit of the Cinco de Mayo.

Viva el Cinco de Mayo!

